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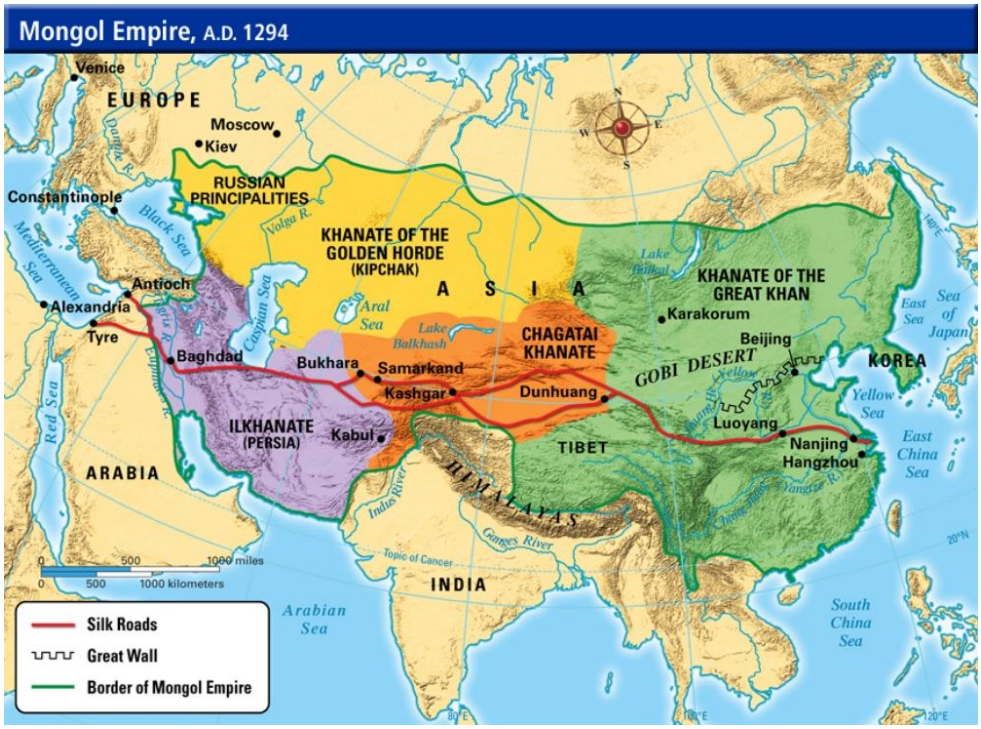
The Mongols and the Yuan Dynasty of China (1271-1368)

The Mongols

In 1206 a momentous event took place on the grassland of northern Asia: the proclamation of a Mongol chieftain, Chinggis, to be the Great Khan of all Mongols. Within seven decades, his armies and those of his sons and grandsons would conquer a vast stretch of land. It stretched from the seacoasts of China and Korea through Central Asia and across Iran and Iraq; then further west to European Russia, also including Ukraine and parts of eastern Europe, north of the Black Sea. The conquered territories were formed into four Khanates, ruled by his sons and grandsons and their descendants. Song China and its neighbours, the Western Xia and Jin empires, were incorporated into the empire of the Great Khan, the foremost of the four Khanates.



Map showing the four Khanates (*Weebly*: retrieved on 26 November 20233 from https://mongolempirewhap.weebly.com/decline-and-fall.html)

How did a relatively small population, from a group of obscure tribes, scattered in a particularly inhospitable environment, succeed in overpowering the armies of much richer and more populous countries? For thousands of years, nomadic herders like the Mongols inhabited the enormous expanses of the steppe, stretching from northeast Asia to eastern Eurasia, where the winter was bitterly cold. Because of the scarcity of water, the land in this region was more suitable for growing grass than cultivated crops. Perhaps the extreme harshness of the homeland of the Mongols, and the competition amongst them for scarce resources, helped them to develop into an extraordinarily hardy and warlike people. They depended on their livestock for most of their basic needs: food (meat, milk, and blood), clothing (leather, felt, furs, and wool), shelter (tenting materials and carpets), transportation (beasts of burden), and fuel (dried animal dung for cooking). They therefore had to move in response to seasonal climatic changes and set up their yurts (tents supported by wooden posts) to where grass was plentiful for their animals to graze. Having to travel with their necessities on draft animals or animal-drawn carts, they did not burden themselves with surplus possessions. The storage of grain for food as practised by the sedentary farmers was not a practical option for them. They hunted wild animals, but these were not a reliable source of food supply. Such a challenging habitat and lifestyle rendered them very vulnerable to inclement weather, or sickness of their herds.

There was intense competition for the meagre resources among rival groups or clans on the grassland, which led to violence among them. Raids for capturing animals and people, and vendettas over past injuries, were commonplace occurrences. Besides fighting, they were also accustomed to conducting diplomatic negotiations or marriage alliances to establish a pecking order, or to achieve a position of dominance in each territory. Warfare, to the Mongols, was a way of life.

Having ridden from an early age and being frequently exposed to armed combat, the Mongols were superb cavalrymen and mounted archers. The short and stocky Mongolian horses, a true match for the hardiness of their riders, were great assets in any military campaign. These pony-like horses could survive long journeys in bitterly cold winters, being able to forage even under the snow. They were very agile in battle, capable of turning quickly in different directions during military manoeuvres.

Marco Polo, who served as an administrative official in China under Mongol rule, bore witness to what the Mongol soldiers and their horses were together could endure:

They are capable of supporting every kind of privation, and when there is a necessity for it, can live for a month on the milk of their mares, and upon such wild animals as they may chance to catch. The men are habituated to remain on horseback during two days and two nights, without dismounting, sleeping in that

situation whilst their horses graze. No people on earth can surpass them in fortitude under difficulties, nor show greater patience under wants of every kind.

He also described the Mongol soldiers as "brave in battle, almost to desperation, setting little value upon their lives, and exposing themselves without hesitation to all manner of danger".[1]

The invention of the stirrup enabled the Mongol horsemen to shoot even when retreating (*arstechnica*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://arstechnica.com/science/2017/05/the-mongols-built-an-empire-with-one-technological-breakthrough/}

The transformation of the Mongol tribes

These hardy and warlike nomadic Mongol tribes, spread out north of the Gobi Desert, would not have become a serious threat to their well-armed neighbours, namely the empires of the Liao, the Western Xia, the Jin, and the Song, until they had gone through a process of social and political transition, like lone grasshoppers gathering into swarms. The process often involved the change from several simpler clan-based units of roughly equal status, related to one another through kinship and sharing communally owned property, into a more complex society of different social classes based on less egalitarian sharing of power and wealth. This development was likely to have occurred because of population growth that intensified

[1] *Ibid.*

the competition for the limited resources in the Mongol tribal homeland. Stronger and well-armed clans would raid others to occupy their lands, take their livestock, and capture their people to enslave them. They would become richer and more powerful. As the competition continued, some tribes might be weakened by vendettas while others might gain greater wealth and power. As regards the weaker clans, they had the option of submitting themselves voluntarily as vassals to the powerful ones, exchanging freedom for the security umbrella, or of taking the risk of being captured and forced into slavery. This development opened up a great socio-economic gap between the ordinary nomadic herders and the wealthy military aristocracy, which became the ruling class, wielding political power and specializing in warfare. Below these were the slaves, often captured like booty after military action. They became the owners' chattels, like goods and animals that could be passed down to future generations, unless they had a lucky break to gain their freedom. The military struggles might eventually lead to the unification of all tribes, or to a balance of power among the leading clans in each region. In case of the latter, the leading clans might join together to form a tribal alliance and put their forces under a unified command to defend themselves against a common enemy, or to invade other tribes or states. Such a development would increase the power of the whole organized tribal alliance and the efficiency of its armed forces. However, serious military setbacks could lead to the breakdown of the alliance and the scattering of its members.

For a tribal alliance to become even more cohesive and militarily powerful, there was another threshold to cross. The next step required the emergence of an ambitious empire builder, a 'strong' man, who would most likely, but not necessarily, have come from the leading clan. A typical profile would describe him as being highly gifted in military leadership, power politics, and organization skills. He would begin his career by dominating the tribal alliance, crushing all internal opposition, and concentrating power, both military and political, in his own hands. Then he would embark on military campaigns, defeating powerful enemies and expanding into their lands. To consolidate his hold over the conquered territories and peoples, he would need to proceed politically, to establish a government with laws, institutions, and an officialdom to support his rule. At some point during his triumphal ascent, he would perpetuate his own power and position, as well as those of his heirs, by setting himself up with due pomp, pageantry, and ceremony, as the official head of a new dynasty.

There were many examples of such transformations having taken place among powerful nomadic tribes of the East Asian steppe grassland, starting with the tribal alliance of the Xiongnu before and after the reign of Modu Chanyu between 209 and 174 BCE at the beginning of the Han Dynasty, and continuing to the empires of the Tanguts, Qidans, and the Nuzhen, which existed contemporaneously with the Mongols, as discussed in chapter 2. After having gained ascendancy over their neighbouring nomadic tribes, the most ambitious nomadic empire builders would carry the fight to the rich Han Chinese empire, if they had the

capacity to amass a considerable number of elite troops, upwards of one hundred thousand, to fight pitched battles against the normally larger forces of the populous Chinese. The rulers of the nomadic peoples, who extended their territories by incorporating more agricultural lands, farmers, market towns and cities into their realms, naturally enjoyed greater wealth, but they had to pay a price. The character of their state was altered. In the case of the Liao and the Jin, both countries became semi-nomadic, developing a mixed economy and a dual system of governance – one for the nomadic herders and another for the settled crop growers. Their very success contained the seeds of their own destruction. The hereditary dynasties of the Liao and the Jin, like their Chinese counterparts, experienced dynastic decline and shared similar weaknesses. In the course of time, their military edge also became blunted.

The transformation described above, particularly the initial stages, was taking place among the Mongols from the late eleventh century to the early years of the twelfth century. During the tenth to most of the eleventh century under Liao rule, the relatively weak and obscure Mongol tribes scattered in the Mongolian plateau traded and co-existed peacefully with the Qidans. As time went on, as a result of economic development and population growth, together with the impact of the Liao, the Mongol tribal society consolidated itself through internal fighting and alliance-making, whereby the rich and powerful clans with larger grazing land, herds, and manpower, became even more dominant. The position and power of some of the leading clans became greatly reinforced after having received official titles from the Liao rulers. The poorer and less powerful ones would become degraded into being their subjects or serving them as their vassals.

The heads of the prominent or aristocratic clans of the Mongols, commonly called Khans, commanded armed forces of clansmen, vassals, and slaves, and together became a military aristocracy. Before the end of the eleventh century, 1089 to be exact, a powerful chief of the Kereit Mongols led the troops of a confederation of Mongol tribes to challenge the Liao. During the first half of the twelfth century, the Mongol military aristocracy had already achieved a Grand Alliance of all Mongols under a paramount chief. One such leader, Hulegu Khan, led as many as several hundred thousand troops fighting against the Jin, which had by then replaced the Liao dynasty as the dominant power of the East Asian steppe. The Grand Alliance did not develop into a lasting empire, and the Mongol aristocratic clans were still fighting each other until the emergence of their own empire builder to unite them under his iron rule.

Chinggis Khan (1162 - 1227)

The greatest empire builder of the Mongols, Temujin, better known as Chinggis Khan, was born in 1162 - an auspicious time, because by then the weak and scattered Mongol tribal society had already been

compacted into larger units of clans dominated by military aristocrats, who could be further amalgamated into a force to challenge the great empires of that region. Chinggis Khan was himself the scion of a Mongol military aristocrat of the Qiyan clan, whose death by poisoning led his troops to disperse, leaving Chinggis, still a minor, his younger brothers, and widowed mother in a vulnerable situation. Chinggis sought the protection of his father's brotherly ally, Toghrul Khan, who was the chief of the Kereit Mongols, and he became the latter's subject. As he grew older, he began to gather his father's old followers and troops, but he could not prevent the forced abduction of his wife and other family members by the Merkit Mongols. He asked Toghrul Khan and another ally to join him to fight the Merkits. His side won a resounding victory. In addition to retrieving his wife and family members, the winners took away quantities of loot and many slaves. Chinggis, then around twenty years of age, had thus successfully launched his career as a military leader.

As the number of his followers grew following the military victory, Chinggis decided to move away from his mentor and ally and set up his own camp. Many Qiyan relatives and notable members from his father and mother's clan came to join him, and together they recreated a tribal alliance of Qiyan clan members. In 1189, the aristocratic members of the tribal alliance met to elect the twenty-seven-year-old Chinggis as their leader. At this point Chinggis demonstrated his considerable ability for systematic organization, by appointing officers to take charge of various functions and roles vital to the operation and maintenance of his army. The appointees were all people with whom he had a special personal bond. They, and the newly established corps of personal guards, were his most trusted and loyal servants. These measures, calculated to strengthen the effectiveness of his military organization, also enhanced his own power.

Portrait of Chinggis Khan (in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan)

(*Wikipedia Commons*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:YuanEmperorAlbumGenghisPortrait.jpg)

As the reformed Qiyan tribal alliance under Chinggis' leadership grew strong, rival Mongol tribes or even former allies felt threatened. During the next seventeen years, Chinggis was occupied with military contests among the Mongols. He appears to have been focused on eliminating potential or actual rivals or challengers, one by one. One of his first military actions was directed against a senior member of his own Qiyan clan, who was accused by Chinggis of violating their tribal alliance by not having sent troops to support Chinggis' campaign against the Tartars, undertaken to avenge an ancestral wrong. The accusation was a pretext used by Chinggis, who wanted an opportunity to eliminate an internal rival. Striking against the Tartars, ostensibly to avenge his grandfather's wrong, just when the Tartars were being routed by a Jin force, was another opportunistic act. In addition to acquiring booty by defeating the Tartars, he was also given an official title by the Jin dynasty as a reward. This Jin official post, though only a nominal one, gave Chinggis prestige and entitlement to govern others.

For several years, Chinggis fought alongside his old mentor Toghrul Khan as his subordinate and tried latterly to form a marriage alliance between Toghrul's granddaughter and his own oldest son. Toghrul Khan and his son, mistrustful of the increasingly powerful Chinggis, decided to kill Chinggis at a sham engagement feast. Two slaves of an ally of Toghrul Khan alerted Chinggis to the secret plot. Soon afterwards war broke out between them. Chinggis' force, being outnumbered, had to retreat and regroup. Keeping himself informed of Toghrul Khan's movements, Chinggis surrounded his enemies' camp when they were unprepared. He prevailed, after battling continuously for three days. The destruction of the powerful Kereit Mongols sent a shock wave to the remaining Mongol tribal groups, the Naimans and the Merkits. The chief of the Naiman challenged Chinggis and was utterly defeated. After Chinggis routed the forces of the Merkits, he held hegemonic power over all the tribes of the Mongolian plateau.

In the spring of 1206, having destroyed all other nomadic tribal powers in the region after a series of campaigns, Chinggis called a great meeting (*quriltai),* during which a shaman, who spoke for heaven, declared him to be the Khan over all others under heaven. It was at this point that Temujin, the leader of the Qiyan tribal alliance, became Chinggis Khan, the paramount ruler of all the nomadic tribes of that region.

Prior to this time, these nomadic tribes had separate identities. Chinggis changed that by setting up new institutions. Instead of being divided into areas controlled by the different tribes, the entire territory he had conquered became a single entity: the Mongol empire. The people of the various tribes all became Chinggis' subjects whatever their previous status or rank, with a new identity as members of the unified Mongol empire and having a stake in its fortunes. Previously some of the heads of the tribal alliances were elected, whereas Chinggis' appointments were hereditary, passing to direct descendants.

As the head of the Mongol empire, Chinggis treated the entire country as his own domain to parcel out as he saw fit. He systematically organized all the people in it into 95 units of 1,000 households each, under which there were two lower administrative levels of 100 households and 10 households. The 1,000-household unit was to be the basic military and administrative entity, each governed by a *nayan* (lord), appointed by Chinggis. Grazing land was assigned to each unit of 1,000 households under their *nayan.* The *nayans* were thus members of the ruling class, and their positions were also hereditary. Chinggis gave the post of *nayan* as a reward to the leaders of tribes who joined him as allies or became his vassals early in the course of his military campaign for ascendancy, and who remained steadfastly loyal to himself or faithful to his cause. Leaders of tribes who came to his side of their own accord rather than being conquered were also made *nayans* over units of 1,000 households of the people of their own tribes. His meritorious comrades-in-arm and loyal servants were allowed to gather the peoples they had captured, together with those from the conquered tribes, to make into units of 1,000 households, and they would each be put in charge of one such unit as a *nayan*. Those granted much larger numbers of households, such as 10,000 or more, were the highest military commanders and Chinggis' sons and brothers. Chinggis divided the empire into subordinate khanates as territories belonging to each of his sons and brothers, except for the central part. This part was the original tribal area of his clan, and it was the seat of the Great Khan, Chinggis himself. Chinggis together with his sons and brothers and their descendants, were the true lords of the land, while the military aristocrats, such as the *nayans,* were all their subjects or servants, who ruled on their behalf.

Having set up these institutions, Chinggis laid down the laws (*jazaq*) of the land to buttress the new social and political order, and to define the boundary between acceptable and criminal behaviour. These laws were a collection of his commands and edicts, which were recorded in writing as the Great Jazaq. The Great Jazaq would be brought out and read during meetings of the khans of the various khanates to elect the Great Khan, and other important meetings or celebratory occasions of the heads of the empire. For general law enforcement, Chinggis created the post of a Supreme Judge, who presided over a judicial organization, conducting hearings, and passing judgements on cases. These were written down as permanent records, not to be altered (*koko debter*).

The Mongols had no written language prior to Chinggis' rule. He was quick to appreciate the usefulness of a written language for empire-wide administration and communication, not to mention the need for writing down his edicts and commands, and for keeping records of all kinds. A Naiman captive with a golden seal carved in the language of the Uyghur Turks appears to have been instrumental in Chinggis' adoption of the Uyghur script for transcribing the language of the Mongols. During the thirteenth century, the civilization

of the Mongols took a great leap forward, as they created a state, acquired a written language, and began to write their own history.

To buttress his personal power and to ensure greater security for the Great Khan and his family, Chinggis upgraded and reformed the imperial guards from a few hundred to ten thousand. They were composed of healthy, strong, and talented youths selected from the sons of the *nayans* and from the common people. They were organized into twenty-four-hour shifts to guard the tents of the royal residents. Some of them were needed for specialized roles, such as scribes, drafters of edicts, cooks, wardrobe attendants, falconers and so on. As personal servants of the Great Khan, they were close to the centre of power. Politically and administratively, they functioned as the inner court. Militarily they were Chinggis' own elite troops. Their positions were above those of the *nayans* placed over 1,000 households. This system served many purposes as regards the Great Khan and his household. Those *nayans* who had contributed a son were less likely to rebel against him. It also gave the participants a stake in the regime.

Shortly after Chinggis set up the structure, the institutions, and the laws to consolidate his rule in the empire he created on the East Asian steppe, he embarked on an open-ended career of conquest. It is properly called a conquest, not simply a raiding and looting of the neighbouring countries, although invading accessible cities and towns to capture and enslave the people and to take away their possessions was certainly a part of the process. (Chinggis is said to have once remarked to his generals that a man's greatest happiness lies in suppressing disorderly crowds, winning victory over his enemy, despoiling his property, riding his handsome horses, and possessing his beautiful wives and concubines. The same source relates that when his sons quarrelled about their inheritance, his advice to them was that 'here are plenty of lands and rivers in the world, you could each enlarge your own territory by conquering other countries'.) Like Alexander, Caesar and other conquerors in the West, these Mongols regarded conquest as a glorious endeavour.

Chinggis Khan's campaigns

His military campaigns were carried out in a deliberate and calculated way, avoiding risk. It appears that he chose to fight only when the odds were in his favour. At the beginning, the size of his army was not extraordinarily large. The total number of his troops, estimated on the basis of a total population of 95,000 households with each 1,000-household providing 1,000 fighting men, would be 95,000. With the addition of 10,000 of his guards, he would have an armed force of 105,000. His soldiers, the most battle-hardened and warlike nomadic cavalry, were peerless fighters. He and his fellow commanders, after nearly twenty years of warring and winning battles against combative militaristic tribesmen like themselves, had become masters of the art of war, and were professionals at conquering. They had developed a first-class war

machine using military tactics that had served them well and brought them phenomenal successes. They were receptive to new military technology and promptly utilized new weapons, such as firearms with explosives, after witnessing their use by the Song. They employed craftsmen and people with special skills from the conquered regions to produce a variety of weapons for them. They lost no time in augmenting their armed forces with conquered peoples. The inclusion of Turks, Persians, and Chinese greatly swelled the size of the Mongol army as time went on. At times captured enemy soldiers were put in the frontline to lead an attack and wear out the opposition on the battlefield, before the elite Mongol troops entered the battle to deliver the final blows.

The Mongols were patient conquerors. With a few exceptions, once they targeted a country, they would persist in attacking it, even if it took them many decades to complete the process. If they had difficulty in advancing into one area, they would try a second, and reserve the option of returning to the first later. They used terror to frighten their enemies into submission. When their army approached a city, which could be the capital city of a state, or a well-defended stronghold of a region, the Mongol commander would send an envoy ahead to ask the authorities concerned to surrender. If such a request were accepted, the Mongols usually let the existing authority continue to rule as a vassal, who would be obliged to pay tribute or taxes to their Mongol overlords, and who might sometimes be asked to send troops to fight with the Mongols or fulfil some other Mongol demands. Should the request be refused, and the Mongols take the city or the region by force, the vanquished would suffer a terrible fate. The invaders would set fire to buildings, plunder, and slaughter the inhabitants mercilessly. In 1257, when Hulegu's army was marching towards Baghdad, he sent a representative to ask the city to surrender. After being refused, Hulegu's soldiers laid siege, and then broke into that city in 1258. An orgy of killing, looting, and burning went on for ten days, with 800,000 people reportedly perishing. The Mongol army's fearsome reputation was surely the reason many cities opened their gates, and commanders of opposing forces went over to the Mongols without a fight.

The Mongol conquests under Chinggis

The rise of the Mongols under Chinggis Khan marked the thirteenth century as an era of the Mongol conquest and empire building. His expansionist drive began in 1205, the year before he proclaimed himself the great overlord of the Mongol tribes. During this period, he sent a raiding party to Western Xia - a close neighbour and, therefore, the first in the line of foreign states to be subjugated. The raid resulted in the seizure of many captives and much livestock. In 1207, he again sent troops, but retreated after discovering Western Xia's strong defensive posture. Finally in 1209, Chinggis' forces inflicted a major defeat on the Western Xia, and then marched to the capital of that country to besiege it. Chinggis also sent an envoy to

negotiate terms with the ruler of the Western Xia. He withdrew after the ruler of the Western Xia offered him his daughter and agreed to become a vassal and pay annual tribute to Chinggis as his Mongol overlord.

Having subjugated the Western Xia into submission, Chinggis' next target was the Jin dynasty, whose empire extended over the region in which the Mongol tribes roamed. His contemplation of an aggressive move was supported by the intelligence he received. Certain disaffected members of the ruling clans of the former Liao dynasty who became Jin officials informed him that the Jin was ripe for destruction, because of ethnic tensions and many other serious weaknesses within this empire. Some of Chinggis' ancestors had been put to death by a ruler of the Jin dynasty for rebelling. On the pretext of seeking revenge for his ancestors, Chinggis waged war on the Jin in 1211. From that year to 1213, Chinggis' forces broke the Jin lines of defence north of the Yellow River, killing many the 300,000 Jin combatants in a few decisive engagements.

The Mongol forces, divided into three lines of command, traversed back and forth combing through a large region north of the Yellow River, leaving some ninety prefectures in ruins, the people massacred or scattered, and their children and valuables carried away. In 1215, the Mongols captured part of present-day Beijing, the Jin 'Middle Capital', letting it to burn for a month. In 1217, Chinggis delegated further advance against the Jin to a subordinate, who was instructed to continue to attack the Jin on the one hand, and on the other to attract local magnates and Jin officials to come over to join the Mongols, with the land and the forces under their control. Many responded and were given hereditary offices by the Mongols, who allowed them to control certain territories and keep soldiers. The Jin also tried to adopt a similar policy, but more of their subjects chose to side with the Mongols, and fight on the instructions of their new masters. As a result, by 1226 all of the present-day provinces of Hebei and Shandong, that were a part of the Jin empire, fell into Mongol hands.

Though preoccupied with military campaigns against the Western Xia and the Jin, Chinggis did not neglect to send envoys and troops to the western parts of Eurasia, to demand the tribes and kingdoms there to acknowledge him as their overlord, and offer him tribute and services, such as sending soldiers to fight with his forces. Many at first agreed but later rebelled. From 1217 his focus turned westward. His forces crushed the rebels, and by 1218 they completed the conquest of Western Liao and the kingdom of the Western Uyghurs. This brought the Mongol-controlled territory right up to the Central Asian Empire of Khwarizm (Khorezm). In 1219, Chinggis led 200,000 troops himself to punish its ruler, after the merchants on the trade mission, as well as the envoys he sent to that kingdom, were either murdered or humiliated. The Sultan of Khwarizm, after losing cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand to the Mongols, was chased by Chinggis' forces to an island near the Caspian Sea, where he died in 1220. His son and heir, Sultan Jaial al-Din,

gathered a force of 100,000 which resisted the Mongols for a while. At the end of 1221 he escaped to India, after the Mongols pursued him to the banks of the Indus River and defeated him there.

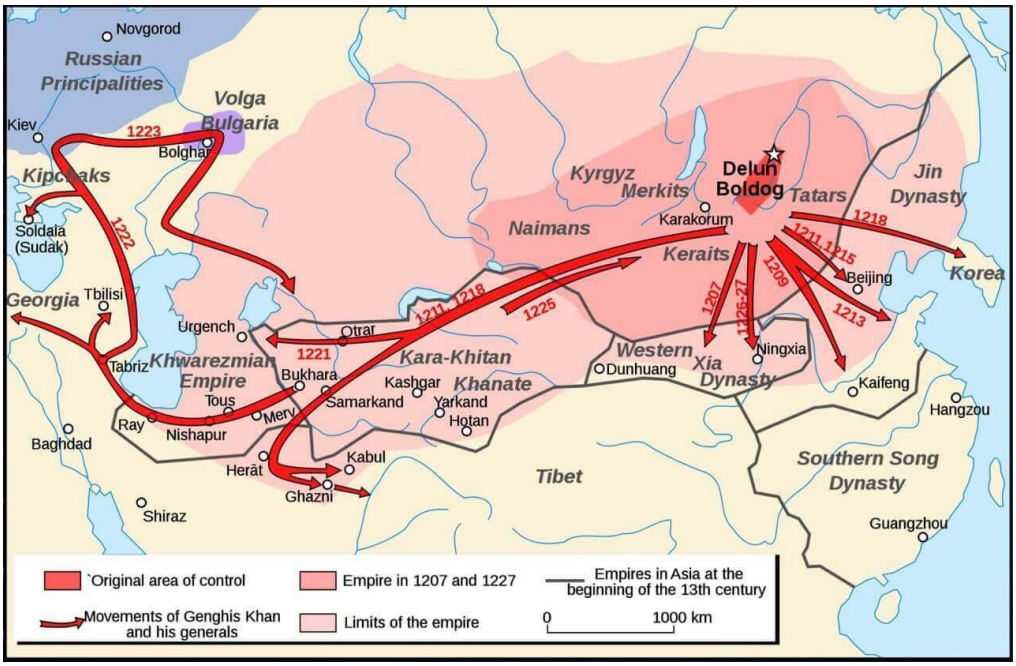
Although the empire of Khwarizm was destroyed, Mongol military expeditions to the west did not end there. Chinggis himself returned home with some of the forces in 1225, after staying in Samarkand to organize garrisons for the conquered territory in the west. Another branch of his army continued to march westward, sacking many cities in central and western Persia. From 1221 to 1224, these Mongol forces then swept through the northern Caucasus, Ukraine, Crimea, southern Poland, and European Russia, crushing resistance, and looting and pillaging even on their homeward journey.

After returning from his triumphal expedition to the west, in 1226 Chinggis led an army to punish the Western Xia because its ruler did not appear to him to be a sufficiently loyal and obedient vassal. In the spring of 1227, when the fall of the Western Xia, with its capital surrounded by the Mongol troops, was only a matter of time, Chinggis let his subordinates deliver the final blow, while he turned his attention once more to attacking the Jin. However, he died soon afterwards of an illness in July 1227, at age 65, when the Mongol conquest and empire building was still a work-in-progress.

During Chinggis's return journey from his expedition to the west, he had left his second son, Chagatai, with a garrison to secure the 'western regions', which referred to the territory adjoining the western border of the then Mongol empire, westward as far as the Amu Darya River and the Aral Sea in Central Asia. After Chinggis' death in 1227, Chagatai endeavoured to establish a khanate for himself and his heirs that would incorporate those lands in Central Asia with the domain given to him by Chinggis earlier, since these two areas were situated conveniently next to each other. Because the Central Asian territory was officially under the jurisdiction of the Great Khan (then Chenggis' third son Ogodei) who would not relinquish his control, Chagatai was not able to achieve his ambition during his lifetime. From 1260 onwards, some of his strong heirs managed to defy the Great Khan and established a semi-independent or independent empire in Central Asia. Frequent violent internal power struggles, over succession especially, as well as numerous wars against external enemies, caused the empire of Chagatai to split up during the fourteenth century. The eastern part became fragmented into individual domains, while the western part became the empire of a usurper, the powerful but ruthless warrior Tughluq Temur, better known in the West as Tamerlane. Tamerlane became a believer in Islam soon after he became Khan in 1348. He commanded other Mongol aristocrats to adopt Islam as their religion.

Chinggis' military expeditions covered a vast area, subjugating or destroying many regimes along the way. Apart from leaving a garrison here and there, he did not attempt to organize regimes to replace the existing ones, or to divide the conquered territories into satraps for his heirs, as he had done in his Mongolian steppe land. He bestowed his legacy on his four sons and their direct lines of descendants and commanded his

heirs to divide the fruits of the conquest and not to fight over the spoils. The four sons did indeed inherit khanates, but not altogether peacefully.



Map showing the Mongol campaigns (*World History Encyclopedia*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11221/map-of-the-campaigns-of-genghis-khan/)

The Great Khan Ogodei

Chinggis' death did not diminish the impetus of the Mongol drive towards expansion. His third son, Ogodei (1186-1241), succeeded him as the Great Khan in 1229 to take charge of the next round of the conquest. Soon after his accession, he received news that Jalai al-Din, the Sultan of Khwarizm, who had escaped to India, had returned to resume his office. Ogodei despatched a Mongol commander, Chormaqan, with an army of 30,000 to overthrow him and install local leaders who would submit to the Mongols. Cormaqan succeeded in doing so in 1231. Thereafter he set up camp southwest of the Caspian Sea, and from there he set out to conquer the surrounding areas in present-day Georgia and Armenia.

Ogodei's own first objective was to complete the conquest of the Jin as Chinggis had intended. Having lost most of its territory north of the Yellow River, the Jin had built strong defensive positions south of it. In

1228, putting up stiff resistance, the Jin forces even won a victory over the Mongols. The Mongols tried a flank attack and solicited help from the Southern Song. For six years the Mongol and Jin forces were locked in fierce combat. The Southern Song did eventually support the Mongols with soldiers and food before the Jin dynasty was finally destroyed in 1234. This brought the Mongol-controlled area south to the border of the Southern Song, whose wealth rendered it an irresistible target for the Mongols.

In 1235, Ogodei sent two of his sons, each leading a mixed force of Mongol and Han troops, to attack the Song, one from the east and the other from the west. On the eastern front, the Mongols won some initial victories. However, from 1237 to 1241, the Song forces fought so valiantly that they were able to recover some lost cities and fight the Mongols to a standstill along the shores of the Huai River, the border between the Southern Song and the former Jin empire. The Mongols had more success attacking the Song from the west. Between 1235 and 1241, Sichuan was serious mauled by these invaders, who pillaged and massacred at will, before they retreated. The Southern Song seemed a hard nut to crack, and during Ogodei's reign as the Great Khan, no significant further advances were made in subjugating the Song.

Apart from defeating the Song, Ogodei had other preoccupations, such as setting up a regime to control and exploit the conquered territory. He had Chinggis' 1206 model of a military command structure with the Great Khan at the very top of a pyramid, distributing territories and people - reckoned as households - in his empire for the support (economically, politically, and militarily) of close relatives and meritorious military leaders, who formed a military and political aristocracy below him, and who were bound to the Great Khan as vassals to a feudal lord. These leaders were in command of their own loyal vassals, who had been given lesser amounts of land and number of households as support, and so on down to the commoners at the very bottom of the structure. Or, he could follow an even older tradition bypassing distribution, and simply establish an overlord-vassal relationship with the existing rulers, or the ruling elite of the subjugated lands. These political structures had been developed in the setting of the steppe. But at this point, Ogodei controlled a large expanse of fertile agricultural land that could support dense settlements in the former Jin territory in north China. A new approach to govern this region and to extract its wealth therefore seemed an attractive option, indeed a necessity. Yelu Chucai, a former Jin official and a descendant of the Liao royal clan, came to his aid. Ogodei took Yelu Chucai's advice to organize a centralized administration for this region, with different tax districts, and to register the households in each district to collect different kinds of taxes at predetermined rates for the government of the Great Khan. He also awarded specific tax districts and tens of thousands of households in those districts to his heirs, his royal relatives, and meritorious officials, for them to collect a limited amount of taxes for themselves, and to receive some benefit of the taxes collected from their area by the centre. However, these aristocrats were accustomed to

viewing the land and the people attached to them as their private properties, and they made frequent collections at will. The dual taxation became exceedingly burdensome to the people.

To enhance the prestige of the Great Khan and the glory of the Mongol empire, in 1235 Ogodei ordered the building of a capital of the Mongol empire at Karakorum, with royal palaces (modelled on the Han Chinese style), official residences, temples, shops and special quarters for other purposes. Since the Mongols had no cities, the capital had to be constructed from scratch, with architects and skilled craftsmen drawn from different parts the empire. Court rules and etiquette were also established, with the help of Yelu Chucai, for assemblies at the court of the Great Khan.

While the Mongol armies were advancing against the Southern Song in the east, Ogodei did not forget about building empires in the far distant lands in the west, where the armed might of the Mongols had had dramatic successes in overcoming local resistances during Chinggis' western campaigns in 1220-25. Ogodei called a top-level meeting in 1235, when it was decided to send a second major military expedition to the west with a large force of 150,000 troops under the leadership of Batu Khan, Chinggis' grandson from the line of his eldest son. The eldest sons of other lines of Chinggis' direct descendants, as well as all Mongol aristocratic families, were obliged to raise troops and lead them to join this expedition, which was dubbed 'the eldest sons' expedition to the west'. The Mongol invaders left Karakorum in 1236. From 1237 to 1242, Batu's forces broke the defences of many cities in present-day European Russia, including Moscow. They captured Kiev, and trampled over many areas of Poland, Hungary, Spain, Austria, Serbia, and Dalmatia. In 1242, Europe was saved from further Mongol attack, when the news of Ogodei's death a year earlier finally reached Batu, who withdrew his army eastward and encamped around the lower Volga.

The election of Guyuk, and then of Mongke

Ogodei's death necessitated once more the election of a successor Great Khan. During his reign, Ogodei had extracted a promise from his imperial relatives that the Great Khan should forever be chosen from his line of descendants. Ogodei had favoured his grandson, Shiliemen, but his imperial consorts, who held the reins during the interim period before the election, chose Guyuk, his eldest son. Unfortunately, Guyuk had offended Batu by being disrespectful to the latter as his commander during the time when Guyuk was taking part in the 'eldest sons' military expedition to the west'. The gathering for the election was delayed for four years because Batu continually made excuses for not being able to attend. Finally in 1246, the imperial clans concerned met without Batu to vote for Guyuk to be Great Khan (r.1246 - 48), Shiliemen being considered too young during this round. As the Great Khan, Guyuk was mainly occupied with gathering troops and leading his imperial guards westwards, ostensibly to recuperate from an illness. In reality, his

plan was to launch a surprise attack against Batu. A widow of Tolui, Chinggis' fourth and youngest son, sensed the covert plan and sent a warning to Batu, who consequently led his troops eastward to counter Guyuk. Before any engagement took place, Guyuk died in mysterious circumstances in 1248.

After Guyuk's death, Batu dominated the next round of elections for the Great Khan. He took it upon himself, as the heir of the branch of Chinggis' eldest son, to call the imperial clans to assemble at his military camp, far from the Mongol homeland in the west. The purpose was to elect Mongke, Tolui's eldest son and a close ally of his, as the Great Khan in 1248. Ogodei's line, refusing to attend the meeting, sent a representative to revive Shiliemen's claim to this position, a claim rejected by Batu, Mongke, and their supporters. Many of Ogodei's, and some of Chagatai's, lines of descendants refused to accept the legality of Mongke's election, because it did not take place at Chinggis' great yurts in the Mongol homeland. Batu then asked his brother to lead an army to accompany Mongke to return there and hold a meeting to legitimize Mongke's election. The refusal of the members of the other two lines to participate delayed such a meeting until 1251, when Batu coerced his imperial clansmen to meet and to acknowledge Mongke as their Great Khan. During the celebration of Mongke's accession, Shiliemen and some of his other relatives plotted against Mongke, but Mongke's falconer discovered the plot. A bloodbath against all the principals and their subordinates ensued. Most of the plotters lost their lands and their lives. Those deemed to be uninvolved retained the domains Chinggis had granted to Ogodei's line originally, in addition to some lands given to them by Mongke. Ogodei's descendants were not pacified by Mongke's gesture. During the second half of the thirteenth century, a strong and ambitious member of Ogodei's line, Kaidu, who was particularly resentful, kept encroaching on the territory of the empire of Chagatai, and waged nearly half a century of war against the empire of the Great Khan. In the early decades of the fourteenth century, after Kaidu's death, his heirs were unable to prevent their empire from being destroyed and their territory being absorbed by the rulers of the empire of Chagatai, with support from the Great Khan.

For enabling Mongke to become the Great Khan, Batu received the handsome reward he desired, which was to be the recognized ruler of the immensely large empire of the Golden Horde, which he was instrumental in conquering and founding. The official acknowledgement by the Great Khan at this point, before the Mongol empire became effectively split up, was important, because the Great Khan inherited Chinggis' mantle as the overlord of the empire. Batu (r. 1251- 1255) represented the line of Chinggis' eldest son, Jochi, whose descendants ruled their own domains carved out of this large territory through local vassals. This empire flourished for about one hundred years. It declined from the middle of the fourteenth century, starting from weakness at the centre. From the 1420s it became fragmented into several khanates ruled by Mongols, but with a Turkish cultural complexion. The Mongols who migrated to the empire of the Golden Horde were relatively few. Many settled on grasslands, mingled with Turkish speaking nomadic

tribes, and eventually became assimilated by their Turkish subjects who followed Islam. In 1502, after being decisively defeated by Ivan III of Russian, the empire of the Golden Horde came to an end.

For Mongke as the Great Khan, another major unfinished task of empire building was that of the conquest of the Southern Song in the east. Related to this more challenging enterprise was the acquisition of areas at the periphery of the Southern Song, and one of these, in its southwest, was Tufan (present Tibet). Earlier incursions had suggested Tufan as an easier target to incorporate into the Mongol empire than its far larger neighbour. In 1252, soon after his accession, Mongke sent Mongol and Han forces to invade Tufan. The Mongol rulers were able to build a kind of feudal benefactor-subject relationship with the Buddhist religious authorities, who dominated this region. In 1253, Tufan became a part of Mongol empire. Mongke had its census taken, based on which he granted large land domains, with households attached to them in groups of ten thousand, to his two brothers, Khubilai and Hulegu, while reserving the richest area for himself.

Mongke then assigned the challenging task of conquering the Southern Song to Khubilai. Because of the Southern Song's formidable defence build-up, Khubilai decided on a strategy of first invading the kingdom of Dali (Yunnan), which was located on the southwest of Southern Song, and then executing a flank attack on the Southern Song from this direction. Between 1252 and 1255, Khubilai accomplished the goal of overthrowing the ruling house of Dali, without the usual wanton slaughter of the defenceless local inhabitants, and he integrated this region into the Mongol empire. There are two notable contemporary consequences of that historical event: first, Yunnan became a permanent part of China; and secondly Islam, introduced to this part of the world under Mongol rule, is still practised there.

After taking over Dali, Khubilai did not rush to attack the Southern Song. He wanted to formulate a long-term plan for holding north China securely, and for overcoming the Southern Song's defences in the most effective way. He arranged for some Han advisors to join him in his own territory in Shaanxi, including the outstanding Liu Bingzhong. These advisors told Khubilai that too much killing and extortionate exactions were turning the area bordering Southern Song into a wilderness. The people of the Southern Song who had witnessed such desolation would strongly resist surrendering to the Mongols. This situation also deprived the Mongol rulers of taxes and soldiers. They suggested that Khubilai should establish a sound administration with the rule of law and equitable taxation, and promote agriculture and sericulture. They also advised him to strengthen and rebuild the defences of the ruined cities in that area, set up agricultural colonies, store grain, and pacify the people there to prepare for a long struggle against the Southern Song. Khubilai accepted these suggestions and advice and, with Mongke's permission, acted upon them with positive results and popular support. However, the new measures antagonized the Mongol aristocrats and greedy officials because they were obliged to curb their demands on the population. His seemingly

ambitious activities also aroused the suspicion of Mongke, his older brother. In 1257, Mongke stripped Khubilai of his political authority, took away his military command, and ordered him ‘home to rest from an illness’.

Mongke then despatched another royal relative with an army to attack the Southern Song from the front, while he himself was to advance on Sichuan in the southwest with his own forces. Although Mongke had successes in Sichuan, both armies later failed to take the fiercely defended cities in the heartland of the Southern Song. In 1258, Mongke decided to ask Khubilai to come out of his forced retirement to take over the command of the assault on the Southern Song. Khubilai, delighted to regain military power, sent an advance corps south with instructions to spare the civilians from burning, looting, and killing, while he consulted his Han advisors as to the most effective strategy. As he was proceeding south with the bulk of his troops, he received news of Mongke’s death in September 1259, and was requested to return north to take part in election politics. He did not want to do so without some demonstrable successes in his military campaign, so he continued south to surround a Song city on the other side of the Yangtze River. The Song general defended the city stoutly. After two months of siege, Khubilai’s soldiers were short of rations and nearly half of them had fallen, leaving Khubilai’s side vulnerable to an attack. The Southern Song prime minister, Jia Sidao, instead of taking the opportunity to attack, chose to appease Khubilai by offering to cede certain territory and pay a tribute of 200,000 taels of silver and 200,000 rolls of silk to the Mongols in exchange for peace.

After Ogodei had consolidated Mongol rule after retaking Khwarizm, most of the territory west of the Amu River all the way to the border of Syria became theirs. However, some independent authorities in Persia as well as the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad remained unconquered. Not long after his accession, Mongke had ordered his brother, Hulegu (the third son of Tolui), to lead an army to subjugate these and any other states outside the Pax Mongolica. After crossing the Amu River in 1256, in three years until 1259, Hulegu’s forces broke the defences of many cities, including Baghdad, slaughtering, plundering, and burning with impunity. Early in the 1260s, Damascus surrendered to Hulegu, after his forces captured the Sultan of Syria, when he tried to escape to Egypt. At this point, Hulegu received news of Mongke’s death in 1259. He led his forces back to Persia, while leaving 20,000 troops to his subordinate, Kitbuqa, to continue the military campaign in Syria and beyond. Kitbuqa sent an envoy to the ruler of Egypt, asking him to surrender. Qutuz, the Sultan, who was a Mamaluke usurper of the throne, killed the hapless envoy, and moved his own army to Palestine to fight the advancing Mongols. When the two armies met in September 1260, the Mamalukes won overwhelmingly. Kitbuqa was killed in this battle, with all his troops. The triumphant Mamaluke forces

then went on to take Damascus and the rest of Syria. This battle was significant for halting further Mongol advances in the Middle East.

The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)

Khubilai becomes the Great Khan, and emperor of the Yuan dynasty

Let us now take up the story of Khubilai[2] and how he became the Great Khan and emperor of the Chinese Yuan dynasty. We left him receiving from the Southern Song prime minister Jia Sidao substantial concessions in exchange for peace. At that point, his wife sent a messenger to hasten him to return north because his younger brother, Arigh Boke, was raising a large army at Karakorum and appointing someone to govern northern China, in preparation for becoming the Great Khan. Jia Sidao's peace offering came as a timely gift for Khubilai, to take back north as a tangible achievement. He accepted Jia's terms for peace and brought his troops immediately northward to the vicinity of Yenjing (Beijing), the northeren China power base he had developed over the years. He did not go to Karakorum, where he feared that he might be outmanoeuvred by Arigh Boke. The two brothers negotiated between themselves as to which one should become the Great Khan, with neither prepared to give way to the other. Then in April 1260, Khubilai decided to take the initiative by proclaiming himself as the Great Khan in Kaiping, the new city he built for himself, after obtaining the support of several of the imperial relatives who had a say in the election of the Great Khan. Adopting the Han Chinese tradition of having a new reign period, he began his reign as the first year of Zhong Tong, abbreviated from the phrase *zhongchao zhengtong*, meaning legitimate rule from the centre. At the same time, he issued an edict justifying the changes by stating that the 'shortcomings in civil governance mandated the present change from the ancestral way', including the adoption of some of the traditional institutions of dynastic rule of the central plain (the northern China plain). Soon afterwards, Khubilai sent out requisitions for soldiers, horses, and food grains from all over north China, and set up a strong corps of imperial guards for himself. These preparations were made against an invasion from the north, rather than in preparation for reactivating the war against the Southern Song, even though Jia Sidao did not fulfil any of the terms of the peace treaty.

Khubilai's pre-emptive move took Arigh Boke by surprise. In the summer of 1260, he hastened to assemble a group of the imperial relatives partial to his claim, in a camp in the Altai Mountains, and they voted for him there as the Great Khan. With two claimants for supremacy, a military contest between them became

[2] As a reminder to the reader: he was the third son of Tolui, who was the fourth son of Chinggis.

inevitable. The war lasted four years, with Karakorum changing hands three times. During this period Arigh Boke lost the acquiescence or support of Hulegu (the empire of the Il-khan) and Alghu (the empire of Chagatai). Since he had confirmed Alghu in his position as the head of the empire of Chagatai, Arigh Boke became angry at Alghu's failure to deliver grain to support his war effort and attacked Alghu. Khubilai took this opportunity to win over the heads of these two western branches of the Mongol empire by recognizing their right to rule their respective areas as suzerain states inside the Mongol empire, rather than as representatives of the Great Khan, which had been the case up to that point. In the spring of 1264, famine hit the region of Ili, the resource-rich area of northern China where Arigh Boke's soldiers had set up camp after plundering and killing the local population. The hungry soldiers had little will to fight, and Arigh Boke was obliged to surrender to Khubilai. Given that both contestants were reared in the military tradition of the steppe, Khubilai's systematic management of the richer resources of North China was a major factor in his favour in this contest.

In 1264, after Khubilai won the contest, he officially conferred the title of Il-Khan on his brother Hulegu. This gave rise to yet another vassal state in the west, the empire of Il-Khan, within the Pax Mongolica. Like the other Mongol vassal states, the relationship between its ruler and the Great Khan, the overlord of the entire Mongol empire, was mostly that of being dependent in form but independent in substance. The Mongol rulers here were relatively more involved in governing this empire in the tradition of this region, and they also maintained fairly close contact, through the postal relay system, with the court of the Great Khan. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the Il-Khan Ghazhan (r. 1296-1304) changed his name to Muhammad and declared that he himself and all the Mongols in this empire were to practise Islam. He introduced comprehensive administrative reforms, prohibited the Mongol lords from arbitrary exactions, encouraged commerce and industry, and promoted the development of science. He fought against the Mamaluke empire in Egypt over Syria, and wrote to the King of France, Phillippe le Bel, asking the latter to ally with him against the Mamalukes, but without success. The empire of the Il-khans did not last long. In 1335, the central authority collapsed, to be followed by civil wars and an invasion from the empire of the Golden Horde. Its successor regime was destroyed by Tamerlane towards the end of the fourteenth century.

Portrait of Khubilai Khan (*World History Encyclopedia*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11204/portrait-of-kublai-khan/)

Khubilai's victory marked the shift of the centre of power of Mongol rule from the northern steppe, as represented by Karakorum, southward to northern China. It also strengthened the hands of those who were in favour of making changes in the Mongol ancestral traditions by adopting certain Han institutions to facilitate Mongol rule in north China. In 1271, Khubilai adopted a Han Chinese dynastic name, Yuan, meaning first. The Chinese accepted the legitimacy of the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty, and its history formed a part of the official historical chronicles of China. In 1272, Khubilai sited his capital at Yanjing (Beijing), where a new imperial quarter had been built. A rebellion by a hereditary Han military aristocrat led to Khubilai stripping all such aristocrats of military power. He reorganized the government administrative system with reference to the models provided by the Jin and earlier Chinese dynasties.

The final defeat of the Southern Song

Now secure in his position as the Great Khan, Khubilai could focus his attention on the unfinished conquest of Southern Song. The Mongols had first attacked Southern Song over thirty years previously in 1235, during the reign of Ogodei, soon after the destruction of the Jin empire. During Mongke's reign, Khubilai's initial attempt at taking one of its cities, in 1260, had not been exactly a success. Khubilai therefore had doubts about being able to subjugate this seemingly indomitable foe. He sought assurance that it was the will of heaven for him to take over an empire that had been ruled by the Zhao family for over three hundred years. While Khubilai hesitated, his generals were keen to go. War offered many opportunities: loot, promotions, and even ennoblement were the rewards of military accomplishments. On the Southern Song side, many of its officials, military commanders, and the ordinary soldiers, motivated by patriotism or loyalty to the dynasty, or fear of the Mongols, were prepared to fight to the death. But the prime minister,

Jia Sidao, and other high officials were corrupt and complacent. They relied on the broad expanse of the Long River (better known as the Yangtze River) as a natural moat, and on their navy and their long experience in defensive warfare to shield them against their fearsome foe. A jealous and oppressive commander-in-chief led to the defection of a very able Southern Song general, Liu Zheng, who subsequently gave Khubilai useful information and strategic advice on the way forward. He also helped his new chief to train naval forces, a weak link in the Mongol war machine, but vital for warfare in an area full of rivers and lakes, and with the seacoast nearby.

In 1268, Khubilai took his advice and ordered his troops to invade the two key cities on the opposite side of river, as suggested by Liu Zheng. It took more than five years to capture one of the two cities. As soon as the first one fell, the defenders of the other lost heart and surrendered. In 1275, the Yuan court directed a force of several hundred thousand troops against the Southern Song, which lost a series of major battles and many of its cities. Thereafter the pace of the war quickened, and as the main Yuan forces streamed down the Yangtze towards Lingan (Hangzhou today), many of the defending forces along the way either surrendered or absconded. Although Khubilai exhorted his generals to refrain from killing the people, the populations of some Southern Song cities suffered almost total annihilation. In 1276, the Southern Song court, preparing to surrender, left its capital at Lin'an undefended. The Yuan forces marched in and took the five-year old emperor Song Gongzong, and the dowager empress to Khubilai, who gave the child emperor a ducal title. Song Gongzong later went to Tufan and immersed himself in Buddhism, while the dowager empress became a Buddhist nun.

Even at this stage, the Southern Song dynasty refused to concede defeat. Its loyalists rallied around the captured emperor's two brothers, who were spirited out of the capital before it fell, to a coastal city named Wenzhou, where the eight-year-old Zhao Shi was declared emperor in 1276. Fleeing from the Yuan forces, the Southern Song court retreated to a ship, under the protection of several armed vessels, and moved further and further south to a small island atoll south of Guangdong. When Zhao Shi died in 1278, his younger brother Zhou Bing was made emperor. After the Yuan pursuers caught up with Southern Song remnants, a fierce battle between the belligerents proceeded late into the night, amidst roaring cannons and the battering of heavy seas. With the rest of the empire gone, this hopeless final struggle, at what seemed like the ends of the earth, concluded with the last emperor of the Southern Song plunging into the sea on the back of his prime minister. Soon afterwards, Khubilai's forces mopped up other scattered pockets of resistance, and completed the conquest of the Southern Song in 1279.

The failure to take Japan

Khubilai's expansionist drive did not end with the overthrow of the Southern Song, although the eastern extremity of the Mongol empire, except for the Korean peninsula, was by then surrounded by sea. Korea had not been spared the unwanted attention of the Mongols who, during the reign of Chinggis Khan in 1218, had extracted tribute from its rulers. Khubilai's predecessors had despatched troops to invade Korea on several occasions, turning to slaughtering, looting, and kidnapping when the rulers of Korea did not satisfy their demands. It was Khubilai who stabilized the Yuan empire's relationship with the kingdom of Korea, as that between a suzerain and a vassal. Khubilai also initiated the custom of marriage between Mongol princesses and Korean kings or heirs to the throne.

The control of Korea greatly facilitated the passage of naval forces between Japan and the East Asian mainland. In addition to the steppe nomad's hunger for conquest, Khubilai, possessing by then the Mandate of Heaven as emperor of the Yuan dynasty, also coveted the role of a universal sovereign in the long tradition of northern China, who would unite all under Heaven and receive the homage of rulers of many kingdoms. The Japanese, however, were not willing to be recruited into such a system. They repeatedly rebuffed Khubilai's attempts to contact them with the help of the Koreans, which began in 1267. Official letters from the Yuan court remained unanswered, and Yuan envoys were turned back even before they reached the Japanese capital, and some were killed. By 1274, his patience exhausted, Khubilai sent an expeditionary force against Japan, consisting of 2,000 Mongols, Han Chinese, and Koreans with 900 warships requisitioned from Korea. Meeting stout Japanese resistance, the landing party returned to the ships, which had to retreat after being damaged by a typhoon.

His next attempt to invade Japan was a much bigger affair of several thousand warships, mainly from south China, and a mixed force of 40,000 Mongols, Han Chinese, and Koreans, as well as 100,000 troops from south China under two separate commands. The leaders of these forces had trouble agreeing on an overall strategy and procrastinated for a month, with their vessels stationed near a Japanese island. The delay was fatal because the typhoon season was approaching. Before any invasion took place, an immense storm buffeted the ships, causing the fleet of vessels tied together or anchored near each other to crash into one another with great force. Although some of the leaders managed to sail away with a fraction of their troops (about one fifth), most of the ships were wrecked and the soldiers and sailors were either drowned, killed, or captured by the Japanese. So Khubilai's second invasion of Japan ended in total disaster. He was persuaded against any further attempt by his ministers, and by the opposition of the people from southern China, who, having supplied the ships and manpower, bore the burden of the losses. Between 1292 and 1293 Khubilai mounted a far smaller seaborne military campaign against Java, whose king was supposed to have insultingly turned away Khubilai's envoy. This invasion also ended in failure. However, during this

period of Khubilai's attempt to expand overseas, Liuqiu was incorporated into the Yuan empire without incident.

The Mongol empire under Khubilai

Khubilai had developed a regular routine for extending his universal empire. He normally started with diplomacy by sending an envoy to 'summon' or 'instruct' the ruler of the country he wished to dominate to come to his court, bearing tributes in the manner of an inferior to a superior lord. Should the ruler come, or if not, at least send his son and heir in his place, Khubilai would confer (*ce feng*) upon the ruler a kingly title to rule his country and give him gifts to take back home. This would be the initial step in establishing the official relationship between the Yuan emperor as the suzerain and the foreign king as a vassal. As a vassal, the foreign ruler would be required to send envoys with tributes at regular intervals, annually or less frequently if agreed. He might have to send his sons or other relatives as hostages to the Yuan court. He or his representatives would be required to kneel and perform the kowtow as a mark of subjection. Before his heir came to his throne, the Yuan emperor had to be approached to confer the kingly title on the heir. There might be demands additional to these standard ones if circumstances warranted them. Should the foreign ruler refuse to enter into such a relationship or reject the Yuan's demands either from inside or outside this system, the Yuan would settle the matter by force. With the rulers of Vietnam, Champa, and Burma, Khubilai tried to consolidate the suzerain and vassal relationship through sending envoys, or by force. At times he even endeavoured to rule these areas directly through the military and administrative regimes he had established.

The rulers of some states were unwilling to comply with the conditions of vassalage. But the Yuan forces sent against them, weakened from the start by the sultry climate, the densely wooded jungle-like terrain, and the tropical insects and diseases, found it difficult to overcome the determined local resistance. The defenders in Vietnam used ambushes and guerrilla tactics against the Yuan invaders with devastating effect. Following these setbacks, internal opposition obliged Khubilai to rely on diplomacy rather than force when dealing with these countries. After the military threat from the Yuan receded, the rulers of these countries, eager for peace and trade with the Yuan empire, observed a nominal tribute relationship with the Yuan by sending envoys with tributes to the Yuan court at regular intervals. By the end of Khubilai's reign in 1294, the momentum of the Mongol expansionist drive, powered by his grandfather Chinggis a century ago, had run out of steam. His successor, Yuan Chenzong (1294-1307) ushered in a policy of conserving and protecting what had been achieved (*shou chen*). Keeping the peace (*wei he*) rather than expansionist war became the new agenda.

When Khubilai ruled as the Great Khan, the territory of the Mongol empire - including the empire of the Great Khan and the other great khanates ruled by the descendants of three other sons of Chinggis and his principal wife - reached its greatest extent. It stretched from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the border of Hungry in the west, with a large swath of the Middle East in between. The territory of the empire of the Great Khan covered an area that included the Chinese lands of the former Song dynasty at its peak, the Jin, the Western Xia, Tufan (Tibet), Dali (Yunnan), Korea, Liuqiu (Taiwan), and the homeland of the Mongols in the East Asian steppes (Mongolia). China, north and south, was once more united and subsumed in the Great Khan's empire, the boundary of which was considerably different from that of the subsequent dynasties that occupied China. The Yuan was a decidedly multi-ethnic empire, and its rulers were non-Han. While other non-Han nomadic rulers of Chinese lands became Sinicized sooner or later, and many took pride in attaining a high degree of the cultural accomplishments that were native to northern China, the Mongol emperors remained strangers to the literary culture of the Chinese, though there were a few exceptions during the fourteenth century. The territory of the Sinicized nomadic dynasties became merged with Chinese lands in the course of time, and their subjects became a part of the multi-ethnic inhabitants of China. In contrast, the Mongol ruling elites mostly lived in their steppe homeland north of the Gobi Desert (abbreviated as Mo Bei in Chinese), or kept domains in, or their close ties with, this region, so it was easy and natural for them to keep their culture and tradition alive. They did not become Sinicized. When the Chinese rebels from the south eventually overthrew the Yuan dynasty, the Mongol ruling house and their supporters retreated to Mo Bei. Since the Chinese successor state, the Ming, did not try to impose direct rule over Tibet, Korea, or even Mongolia, the territory of the Ming was a great deal smaller than that of the Yuan.

Characterization of the Yuan Dynasty

Unlike any of the other dynasties that ruled China, the Yuan rulers effectively enforced a policy of treating their subjects according to their ethnic origins in a hierarchical order. There were roughly four major divisions, which naturally placed the Mongols at the top. They were followed by the Se Mu (mostly Muslim Central Asians), with whom the Mongols were familiar through trade contacts; then the Han (including for example former subjects of the Jin and Liao empires in northern China, and some Koreans); and lastly the Southerners (former subjects of the Southern Song, the more remote and the last to be conquered, also called 'the newly–submitted peoples'). Although no edicts or documents have been found that explicitly stated this policy, it was reflected in the law, the judicial processes, in matters relating to taxation, and in official appointments. Marriage was expected to occur within members of each group, and each followed its own custom with the male considered the dominant partner. Marriage between members of the different

groups was not prohibited, but the custom of the male side would be followed. However, if a man from another ethnic group married a Mongol woman, the custom of the male side need not be followed. Polygamy was sanctioned because the Mongols wanted their population to grow. Marriage between a free person and a serf or slave was punishable by either a two-year prison sentence against the free man, or the degradation of the free woman to the position of a serf or a slave. The Mongol military aristocrats, like other tribal nomads, thrived on having serfs and slaves. This custom was widespread when China was being conquered and its people captured or displaced. There were slave markets doing a brisk trade.

This social order, which was created and upheld by the Mongols, was designed to serve their interest as the ruling elites. It favoured themselves and their foreign helpers, whom they relied upon for experience and skills in areas such as governing sedentary populations and managing a complex economy, which were not indigenous to the Mongols. These few foreigners did not constitute a threat to the Mongol rulers. The ethnic classifications and gradations were the Mongols' method to preserve and fix their privileged position permanently, with themselves at the top and with the Chinese majority at the base of the social pyramid. Their other tactic for holding society at the existing status quo was to register people (households) in hereditary occupational categories, such as soldiers, farmers, artisans, Buddhist monks, astrologers, miners, Confucian scholars and so on. Members of some of these groups were obliged to give one month's service annually, free to the state, as corvee (a labour service tax).

Yuan dynasty porcelain dish, mid-fourteenth century.(*Wikipedia*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Yuan_Dynasty,_porcelain_dish,_mid_14th_century.jpg)

Governance

Although the Yuan took on some of the trappings of a traditional Chinese dynasty, it was essentially a colonial regime, in that the Mongols were the decision-makers, who occupied most of the high offices of the government. The Mongols formed the top layer of the ruling elite and kept military power in their own hands. Below them were Muslim Central Asians, such as Persians and Uighur Turks, who held high administrative positions. There were even a few Europeans who served as Yuan officials, the most famous of whom was Marco Polo, a merchant from Venice. They distrusted the Chinese, who were the majority in their realm, perhaps out of fear that the Chinese might rebel or overwhelm them, being much larger in number. There was, in fact, one case of a Chinese rebellion by a powerful Chinese marquise (*shi hou*), an aristocratic title given by the Mongols to reward Chinese warlords, who had fought on the side of the Mongols in north China against the Jin. This Chinese rebellion, which occurred during the early years of Khubilai's reign, had a strong psychological impact on him, because it was not just a Chinese peasant revolt, such as occurred here and there in southern China: it was seen as a treacherous act by someone who was expected be loyal to the Mongol dynasty. It deepened the suspicion and mistrust of the Mongol ruler towards the Chinese. Thereafter, all Chinese hereditary marquises, even though they had nothing to do with the rebellion, had their troops taken away, and their noble titles ceased to be hereditary.

There were some Chinese high officials during the Yuan, and they were mostly the descendants of the former Chinese marquises. Not until 1313 did the Yuan dynasty make a serious attempt to revive the civil service examination, which had been used not only by the Chinese, but also by foreign-ruled dynasties like the Jin, to select officials educated in Confucian ethics. When this institution was re-established, quotas were set that limited the number of passes from each category of the ethnic groups, in such a way as to discriminate against the Chinese majority. It did not become a highway for entering government service: only around eight percent of officials of Third Grade and above came through this channel. The Chinese clerks did the bureaucratic paperwork necessary for the civil administration of the empire. They had a reputation for engaging in corrupt practices, and the Chinese scholar-gentry class held them in contempt. Nevertheless, they were deemed adequate as lower-level assistants for their Mongol masters because they could read and write, and had hands-on experience of local government procedures. They had opportunities for promotion and filled the lower to middle ranks of the Yuan officialdom.

Being nomadic herders, the Mongols did not have experience in ruling over a country with densely settled sedentary population, some of whom dwelt in cities, while most made a living from agriculture. Turning large tracts of agricultural land into pastures was a possible option that had occurred in northern China, and in other areas in connection with raising horses for the royal relatives, but a better option existed. Since the main objective of the Mongol conquest was to extract wealth, we have seen that Ogodei decided to tax the

agricultural population, as advised by Yelu Chucai, accepting it as a better choice for achieving the desired objective. To do so, the Mongols had to adopt certain Han-Chinese institutions and modes of government, known as *Han fa* - literally the Han method – or we*n zhi* (civil governance). Since the reign of Ogodei, and even more so under Khubilai, *Han fa* was used to divide the empire into administrative units from the provincial level down to the counties, to carry out a census of the households in each local district, and to assess the tax liability due from each household. In addition to Han Chinese officials, the *Han fa* had the support of a few Yuan emperors, who wanted to shift the balance of power more to the centre, and to eliminate the unbridled corruption and abuses in government administration. These were the Yuan rulers who had received a Confucian education while growing up in northern China, as opposed to the ones who had spent their formative years immersed in the martial tradition of the peoples of the steppe. One of them, Yuan Renzong (r. 1312-1320), re-established the state examination for official recruitment in 1315, after the system had fallen into disuse from the beginning of the Yuan. Renzong's attempts at reform using *Han fa* were thwarted by his mother, the dowager empress, who placed her own appointees in key positions and opposed any changes to the status quo.

Besides taxing the agricultural population, the Yuan, like its Song predecessor, also taxed commercial transactions and commodities, such as salt, alcohol, vinegar, tea, and various metals and minerals. The taxes on the households were paid in grain, cloth, and labour service. In 1238, these taxes from Mongol-controlled areas in north China were worth 1,100,000 taels of silver. In the following year, an Islamic merchant, Aodulaheman, placed a bid to collect twice the above amount of taxes for Ogodei, and was given the job. From then on, the task of tax-collection was mostly farmed-out to merchants of Central Asia, who operated such a ruinously oppressive tax regime that it forced people to abscond and become outlaws. After the conquest of the Southern Song in 1279, the Yuan found itself in the happy position of seeing the revenue from the farming sector doubled.

There was a problem in shipping the grain from the southern rice-basket to the capital region using the Grand Canal, which fell into disuse early in the twelfth century and was no longer navigable. The Yuan resorted to coastal shipment from the mouth of the Yangtze River to the port nearest to their capital at Beijing, which was Tianjin. When work on the restoration of the Grand Canal was eventually completed near the beginning of the fourteenth century, this inland waterway was used for transporting taxed grain and other products to the north, without diminishing the importance of the sea route.

Reluctant to use their Chinese subjects to help them govern the empire, the Mongol rulers turned to the Central Asians, Muslim merchants mainly, and entrusted them with the vitally important job of managing the financial affairs - fiscal as well as taxation - of the empire. These powerful lords of finance naturally

took the opportunity to fill their own coffers as well as those of the state. They controlled the issue of paper currency, an innovation of the Song adopted by the Yuan. While the Song had limited the validity of the paper money it issued to certain areas and periods of time, the Yuan made it an empire-wide currency without time limits on its validity. The value of the paper money was based on silver, which the government collected as taxes, and kept in its treasuries at the capital and in some cities in the provinces. Although the value of paper money issued in 1260 fell when its conversion into silver was forbidden, paper currency could still be viable, and its value maintainable, if the government kept sufficient silver in its stores to support the paper money in circulation. As time went on the amount of silver and gold reserves kept by the government to support the currency in circulation continued to decline, leading to inflation. Despite tax increases, the income of the over-spending government fell increasingly short of its expenditure. When the government resorted to printing more money to remedy the situation, inflation only became worse. Bouts of inflation were followed by the government's effort to stabilize the currency, through devaluation or tax increases, without achieving lasting success. Near the end of the dynasty in the 1360s, inflation was so severe that the paper currency became worthless. Forgery was another problem with the printed money. Although the crime carried the death penalty, that did not prevent a large amount of forged paper money circulating around the entire empire, damaging the monetary system. When the empire of the Il-Khan suffered serious financial strain under Gaykhatu Khan (r. 1291-1295), he also issued paper currency at Tabriz, the capital. Merchant refusal led to the abandonment of paper currency, but *chao*, the Chinese word for it, has remained in use in the Persian language of today as *chaw*.

Commerce and trade

The commercial expansion under the Song, both internally and with foreign lands, continued to flourish in Yuan times, particularly during the decades of relative peace after the fall of the Southern Song. The Pax Mongolica rendered the inter-regional overland trade along the silk roads and steppe roads more secure. The renovated Grand Canal facilitated transport of goods between northern and southern China. Cotton became a large export item in addition to the usual silks, ceramics, and lacquer ware. Spices, pearls, and precious stones were among the notable imports. Taxes on commerce were a major source of the state revenue. For example, the levy on salt, the most important commodity tax, yielded over 7,600,000 ingots of silver for the Yuan treasury during the 1330s.

Unlike the Chinese ruling elites educated in the Confucian mould, who generally held merchants and mercantile activities in disdain, the Mongols had the opposite outlook. As nomadic herders of the steppe, trade supplied them such products as grain, metal, cloth, salt, tea, and medicine, which were highly welcome, if not necessary, supplements to what they could derive from their livestock. As the post-conquest

wealthy upper class of the society, the Mongols of the Yuan dynasty were able to indulge in their love of luxury goods, such as pearls and precious stones, despite their enormous expense. They valued merchants because the latter could satisfy their need for several basic consumer items, as well as their taste for certain luxury items. The merchants they were most familiar with were Muslim traders from the Middle East and Central Asia, often Iranians, who dominated the inter-regional overland trade along the Silk Road, as well as the overseas trade of the spice routes, which included China. The Mongols favoured these foreign merchants, offering them patronage, preferment, privileges, and opportunities to amass wealth.

These sophisticated inter-regional traders had knowledge of the banking practices of the Muslim world, and they introduced the Mongol ruling elite to usury. The Mongol aristocrats, possessing surplus wealth from exploiting the subjects of their conquered lands, were relative strangers to earning interest from money. The Muslim traders, who could put fresh investments to good use in their lucrative businesses, took to borrowing money from the Mongols, and then rewarded their creditors with high rates of interest on the loans. It was obviously a partnership that benefited both sides. Some of these merchants made fabulous fortunes from purchasing the right to collect a variety of taxes. Some had the licence to trade in pearls and precious stones. This was an extremely lucrative business with a captive market of consumers who were the Mongol ruling elites. During the reign of Emperor Taiding (r. 1323-1328) the sum owed for purchases of pearls reached 400,000 silver ingots, which was equivalent to nearly four times the annual silver budget of the country (110,000 ingots).

Rich merchants enjoyed high social status. Some had the privilege of special access to the royalty, participation in important court ceremonies, and exemption from labour services. Many became officials through appointment or purchase. They did not shy away from conspicuous consumption and ostentatious displays of wealth, a situation witnessed by Marco Polo. Such a lifestyle was anathema to the Confucian scholars, who stressed the virtues of thrift and a simple life. Successful Chinese merchants also benefited from the rise in social status, but they were not competing on an equal footing with their foreign rivals. Chinese owners of merchant fleets participated in the overseas trade of the spice routes, which, like long-distance overland trade, was also dominated by Muslim merchants. Some of the foreign merchants were given special passes in long-distance overland travel, with the privilege of using the services of the government-maintained postal relay stations.

Postal relay stations

Another Chinese institution which the Mongols adopted was the system of postal relay stations that were responsible for the transmission and delivery of official mail, as well as for providing accommodation for the messengers and travelling officials. During decades of wars of conquest and consolidation of power, the Mongols' need for a reliable network of communication, covering the major routes of long-distance information transmission and travel, prompted first Chinggis, then Ogodei and Khubilai, to restore and strengthen the old postal relay stations of their predecessors, and to set up new ones to include the steppe roads and major lines of communication in Tufan (Tibet). A central administration was set up by Khubilai in the capital at Yanjing to oversee the approximately 1500 postal relay stations. The stations were placed at intervals of around 50 to over 100 li (1 li is equal to 0.5 kilometre). The management of the local stations was the responsibility of taxpayers along the routes. Relatively well-to-do households were chosen to supply and run these stations in lieu of the usual taxes and corvee. Once chosen, they were registered as hereditary postal-relay households, over 300,000 of which were scattered throughout the Yuan empire. On these households fell the duty of providing beasts of burden, such as horses, oxen and remounts, suitable vehicles for transport, food and shelter for the messengers and travelling dignitaries, and personnel to operate the stations. Two or three thousand postal-relay households might be needed to support a large postal-relay station, while a few tens might be sufficient for a small station. For urgent official communications, there were special express delivery stations. Postal relay stations were also set up in some of the other khanates of Chinggis' heirs. These postal routes surely facilitated travel and communication in the domains of the Mongols. Couriers, subjects, and officials of the Yuan and other Mongol-ruled khanates, merchants from Central Asia and beyond, envoys of various principalities and powers, Buddhist monks from Tibet, and Christian prelates of Western Europe all had to traverse these routes on their way to or from Outer Mongolia and Beijing. Although long-distance travellers also used the maritime routes, those who had official business tended to take the postal roads.

Religions during the Yuan

Before Chinggis Khan launched his career of conquest, the Mongols believed in Shamanism. It was a kind of pantheism, the believers in which worshipped the sun, moon, water, fire, mountains, earth and especially the everlasting heaven above. The shamans mediated between the human and the spiritual world. They were expert diviners, who could manipulate themselves into a state of trance and transmit messages from heaven. While building their empire, the Mongols encountered many different religious beliefs and practices, which they welcomed with open arms. It was as if they did not want to offend other powerful deities or forego their blessings.

In the empire of the Great Khan, our main concern here, the religions with substantial following besides Shamanism were Buddhism, Daoism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam. The faithful of all these, as well as others with fewer followers, such as Judaism and Manichaeism, were able to worship in their churches, temples, or mosques, without official interference provided they respected Mongol rule and kept peace with one another. The registered clergy of the various officially recognized sects were exempt from the corvee duty. They also had the privilege of being accommodated at the postal stations on their travels. The leaders of the Daoist and Buddhist sects vied with each other to win the emperors as adherents and patrons of their religious establishments. The different rulers responded differently to the appeals of their religious supplicants. Of the Buddhist sects, the Mongol rulers favoured Tibetan Lamaism with its magical appeal of mantra and mandala, while Chan Buddhism was popular with the general population. The Yuan court appointed the authoritative clerics, or aristocratic believers, of the different religious persuasions to govern their own sects, under the general supervision of the lama favoured by the court. The emperor, being in control of the religious sects through their appointed religious officials, remained the highest authority on all religious matters. For example, Khubilai decided that the only authentic Daoist canon was the Daode Jing and ordered all others to be burned. Fortunately, this order was not thoroughly executed before it was rescinded.

Islam flourished under the Yuan as a consequence of the power, wealth, and high positions of the Muslim Central Asians. One of Khubilai's grandsons, Ananda, who had a domain in Anxi, became a Muslim after being brought up by devotees of Islam. He ordered the 150,000 Mongol troops under his command to take up Islam.

Nestorian Christianity had powerful adherents among the Yuan ruling elites. The Ongud tribe, which Chinggis conquered and absorbed into the united Mongol nation, had already accepted Nestorian Christianity. Early in the Crusades, the possible existence of a Christian kingdom of Prester John in the east aroused western Christendom's hope of finding an ally against the Muslims. The Italian Franciscan, Odoric of Pordenone, who visited the interior of China during the 1320s, associated the Nestorian Onguds with that legendary Christian country. The rise of the religion-friendly Mongols again stimulated interest in the West in winning such an ally, or possibly converts to Christianity, and led Pope Innocent IV to despatch a Franciscan cleric, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, in 1245 to seek out the Great Khan, Guyuk at the time. Later, at the time of the Sixth Crusade in 1253, the same Pope and the French King Louis IX sent to Mongolia an envoy, William of Rubruck, who had an audience with Mongke at Karakorum. Neither visit achieved the desired outcome.

The appearance in Constantinople and Rome, in 1287-88, of the Nestorian Monk Rabban Bar Sauma, and his disciple Mark from northern China, prompted Pope Clement III to send the Italian Franciscan, John of

Montecorvino (1247-1328), as a missionary to Yanjing (Beijing), where he built many churches and baptized some 6,000 people. Some 30,000 Greek Orthodox Christians who had been brought to Yanjing as soldiers, craftsmen, or captives, by the returning Mongol troops from their expeditions to the West, also converted to Roman Catholicism through the efforts of John of Montecorvino, whose great success prompted Pope Clemment IV to appoint him the archbishop of Yanjing. The archbishop despatched some other Catholic missionaries from Rome to build churches in Quanzhou, then the premier port city in southern China. This first wave of missionary activities of the Catholic Church in China subsided without a ripple for over two hundred years. The work of these Franciscans was unknown to the Jesuit missionaries, who arrived in Ming China from the 1600s.

A permanent legacy of the Mongol interlude was the spread of Islam to China. There are sizable Muslim populations in Gansu and Yunnan today. Mosques are a familiar part of the architectural scene in these provinces, and in Xinjiang in northwest China. The Chinese word *Hui* refers to a person who believes in Islam, and it also denotes ethnicity in the Chinese definition of national minority. Today there are an estimated twenty-five million Muslims in China[3], approximately half of whom live in Xinjiang.

Diaspora of peoples

During the century of wars of conquest, the lands the Mongols invaded usually suffered massive destruction of the cities and countless loss of life. Some of the survivors were taken by the Mongols as captives and used as soldiers or slaves, and they might spend the rest of their lives far away from their homelands. The Mongols normally spared the lives of craftsmen, technicians, engineers, and clerics of any faiths in the cities they broke into. They valued and respected those categories of people, who might be transported to places where their knowledge and skills could best be used. The dislocation and transfer of people from one part of the Mongol domain to another was a consequence of the Mongol domination. The 30,000 Greek Orthodox Christians mentioned earlier, who were brought to Yanjing, were not the only examples of the massive transfer of people from the West to China. There were also over 10,000 Russians brought to Mongolia and China as soldiers, craftsmen, or slaves. In 1330, the Yuan government ordered them to assemble, and organized them into a special unit of military guards. They were formed into units of 10,000 households and were given farmland to settle as a military-agricultural colony near Yanjing.

The Chinese diaspora continued under the Yuan. During the fourteenth century, there was a Chinese colony at Tomasik, which developed into today's Singapore. Mongol expeditionary forces sent to invade Japan,

[3] China – The World Factbook. Retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/#people-and-society on 27 January 2024.

Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Java were largely recruits of the Southern Song soldiers and sailors who submitted themselves to the Yuan. The Chinese survivors of the disastrous campaigns in these countries were most likely to have remained there. There were Chinese hydraulic engineers working on irrigation in the Tigris and Euphrates River basins. A Chinese Daoist Monk, Chang Chun, who journeyed to Kabul to visit Chinggis Khan in 1222, came across Chinese craftsmen in Outer Mongolia and Samarkand, and heard of a settlement of Chinese weavers in the upper Yenisei valley.

Cultural diffusion

During the age of the Mongol ascendancy, the greater movement of peoples between Asia, the Middle East and Europe, together with the writings of the travellers, facilitated the spread of knowledge, technology, and inventions from one part of the world to another. It was before the rise of Europe, and the Chinese and Islamic civilizations were, in many ways, leading the world. A Muslim observatory was established at Beijing. Arab texts were translated into Chinese at the Islamic Academy set up under Khubilai's reign. Influences from Muslim Iran were likely to have stimulated the development of astronomy and mathematics, which continued to advance in China under the Yuan. Chinese astronomers and physicians served at the court of the Il-Khan in Tabriz. Rashid al-Din (1247-1318), a Jewish convert to Islam and prominent official at the court of the Il-Khan, arranged to have Chinese works translated into Persian. The book, known as *Treasures of the Il-Khan on the Sciences of Cathay* (1313), was the result; it is among the library collection in Istanbul in modern Turkey. Chinese influences are detectable in Persian miniatures, ceramics, and music, and in the Iranian architecture of the Mongol period.

It is unlikely to have been accidental that an ancient Chinese invention, the breast-strap for harnessing horses (third to second century BCE), the not quite so ancient wheelbarrow (first to second century CE), and the sternpost movable rudder in ships (first to fourth century CE) appeared in Europe from the late twelfth to the thirteenth century. This was the time of the last Crusades, when the Europeans fought against the Muslims of the Middle East, who already had centuries of political, military, and commercial contacts with the Chinese. During the Mongol epoch, there was more transmission of Chinese discoveries and technical advances to Europe. For example, paper - originated in China during the first to second centuries CE - was first imported into Europe from the Islamic world during the twelfth century, before it was produced in Italy at the end of the thirteenth century. Bridges with segmented arches (by 610 in China) appeared in fourteenth century Europe. Metallurgical techniques in connection with the making of iron and steel from China's antiquities came into use in the Rhine valley during the fourteenth century. The Mongols introduced firearms into Europe at the battle of Sajo in Hungary in 1241. The origin of printing, wood

engraving, and the use of movable type from eighth to eleventh century China gave rise to the development of printing with movable type in Europe during 1430 to 1460.

The last three were important elements that went into the crucible of Europe's modern transformation. In Europe, firearms underwent potent systematic development with major socioeconomic and political repercussions. The new weapons and military organization led to the obsolescence of the warrior aristocracy of medieval Europe. In China, they remained weapons in the arsenal among others, with little impact on the socioeconomic or political sphere. The place of steel in the evolution of modern transportation and manufacturing industry is well known. Paper and printing appeared felicitously during the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation in Europe, facilitating the intellectual ferment and the spread of knowledge - biblical knowledge included - of that age. The attraction of goods from the East and the accounts of European travellers to the empire of the Great Khan, particularly Marco Polo's depiction of the fabled wealth of Cathay, stimulated Western desire for greater contact with the East. It became a part of the impetus behind the drive of the modernizing Christian countries of Europe, eager to bypass Muslim dominated trade with the East, to circumnavigate the globe, and usher in the age of European imperial expansion. The Mongol Great Khans neither joined Western Christendom as allies against the Muslims in the Middle East, nor became converts to Catholicism as the Roman Emperor Constantine had done. Their vast empire benefited the West through cultural diffusion from China, in ways that were unexpected and far reaching.

Effects on China

By taking over a prosperous, though war-torn, Southern Song in full commercial expansion, the Mongols reaped substantial material benefits. Under their merchant- and trade-friendly policy, commerce continued to flourish. However, there were built-in distortions and outflow of resources, because of the special privileges given to the Muslim merchants of Central Asia, and financial collaboration between these merchants and the Mongol ruling aristocrats. The latter had access to the surplus wealth of China through taxation, and through the Great Khans' gifts to them on celebratory occasions. These gifts amounted to a serious redistribution of the wealth of the empire. The Great Khans had to dig deeply into the state treasures to keep the tradition going. While paper money was constrained to circulate in China only, the precious metal silver was transferred to the western part of the continent, such as the Middle East and Europe. This movement of silver accounted for the shortage of silver towards the end of the fourteenth century near the beginning of the Ming dynasty, which succeeded the Yuan.

During the Yuan, Chinese society became impoverished as a result of being involved in a foreign trade from which it drew little profit. In addition to the general immiseration of society, the Chinese suffered alienation, because the Mongol regime discriminated against the Han and Southern Chinese in their own homeland by its policies and laws. It provided very little scope for the educated ruling elites of China, the Chinese gentry, to assume their normal role of participating in governing the country. Since the cultural climate was not favourable for serious literary production, the energy of the educated Chinese channelled itself instead into the production of popular literature, in the vernacular dialects of their regions. Many poems, satirical songs, novels, short stories, and plays were produced. Drama with singing and dancing became highly developed in Yuan times. Although a large body of these works disappeared, fortunately some outstanding examples have remained to this day. The legacy turned out not to be entirely negative in the end.

The Mongol episode in China, from beginning to end, was characterized by war. From Chinggis's campaign against the Western Xia in 1211 to the conquest of Jin in 1234, there were over two decades of war in various parts of northern China. The conquest of the Southern Song, started by Ogodei in 1235, ended in Khubilai's reign in 1279. Although fighting was not continuous throughout those forty-four years, there was intense fighting in some areas of the Southern Song territory during at least half of that period. Hard statistical records or summaries of the death toll, the dislocation of the people, the plunder and destruction of the countryside and the cities are lacking, but there are descriptive accounts of the terrible aftermath of some of the Mongol military campaigns in China. It is not difficult to conceive of the pain and suffering, and the sense of loss the inhabitants of the war-torn land had to endure during that time. There were in addition other wars connected with Khubilai's stewardship. From the 1260s onwards, there were civil wars and rebellions in north China, which he suppressed. His expansionist wars against Japan and other countries overseas, as well his military campaigns against rebellious or encroaching khanates of Ogodei and Chagatai from the west, though not fought directly on the Chinese soil, all had to be supported by the taxes and services of the people of his empire. After a new emperor Chengzong ascended the throne, these wars came to an end around the beginning of the fourteenth century, when the Mongol dynasty decided on a policy of keeping what they already possessed, rather than of continuing to enlarge the empire.

The end of the Yuan

It was not easy for the Mongols to keep their empire stable and viable for very long. The Yuan never organized a powerful centralized government to rule the whole empire with uniform laws and procedures in the manner of Han governance. Its founding emperor, Khubilai, presided over a structure that balanced

the power of the Great Khan at the centre with the power of the hereditary aristocrats, who were largely Chinggis' relatives or descendants, and who controlled armed forces and were given landed domains and people to support them economically in accordance with the tradition of the steppe. In addition to these two strata of ruling elites, the rich Muslim Central Asians, particularly those who held high offices, constituted another group of power holders. Should an emperor die without having established a successor in accordance with the rules of Han governance, the royal aristocrats together with the empress dowager, who would temporarily assume power as the regent, would have the right to elect the next emperor from the eligible heirs. This occurred quite frequently, leading to factional fighting and even civil war on one occasion. The emperors so chosen, even when they were not minors, would start their reigns being beholden to those who had elected them. This system did not favour strong emperors, or a sufficiently empowered and well-organized central authority to check and control empire-wide financial malfeasance and abuses of power, particularly on the matter of taxation. The Yuan official tax rates were not unreasonable by past standards, but the taxpayers were ruthlessly exploited by the Muslim tax-farmers, who were free to take their own cut as long as the government got their quota. Despite regulations concerning what the Mongol aristocrats were entitled to collect from the residents in their domains, there were widespread abuses. Since the people were powerless to resist extortionate demands from either the official tax collectors for the central government, or the exaction from the representatives of the largely absentee Mongol holders of the Chinese domains, they would flee when the burden became too much for them to bear and join the ranks of the roving homeless (*liu min*). The incessant wars, the unstable currency accompanied by periodic inflation, together with the highly irregular and oppressive tax regime, rendered the Mongol rule economically unsustainable, even without adding other negative factors such as Han resentment against the ethnic discrimination which was part of the political oppression of alien rule, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor of the land. In the late 1330s, a trickle of rebellions started in south China, and by the 1350s it became a deluge, engulfing all of China.

Although it was illegal for the Chinese to keep horses and weapons of any kind - even the possession of bamboo was prohibited because bows and arrows could be fashioned from it - the Chinese managed to arm and train themselves to fight. In 1351, Han Shantong, a leader of the popular Buddhist sect known as the White Lotus Society, used religion as a cover to incite and gather people for insurrection. Han claimed Song royal descent and led a movement to restore the Song dynasty. His group tried to stir up peoples' resentment against the Mongol exploitation by reminding them of the extreme poverty of southern China, while the northern steppes became rich. Many of the desperately poor longed for deliverance from their life of suffering; they burned incense and prayed for the dawn of the millennium when the Maitreya Buddha would come and bring paradise to earth. Taking advantage of the popular mood, a cloth vendor, Xu

Shouhui, rose up in rebellion, also in 1351, with the claim of being the Maitreya Buddha himself. His movement, as well as the one for restoring the Song, expanded quickly, and achieved considerable military success. The leader of another uprising gathered followers with the slogan: ‘smash the rich; benefit the poor’. These words encapsulated the anger of the poverty-stricken and reflected the increasing social tension as the gulf widened between the rich and the poor. Most insurgents wore red turbans as their badge of rebellion. Before long, the insurgents captured major cities and occupied large territories. The rebels had demonstrated to the enemies of the Yuan that the Mongol military machine was rusty, and that the dynasty had become too weak to keep order. There was a documented case of three Mongol commanders, who were ordered by the court to take action against certain rebel forces. Softened through leading self-indulgent lives in pursuit of pleasure, they had little stomach for fighting. Even though they had several thousand elite cavalry troops supported by other forces, they were among the first to run away when confronted by a host of armed men with ‘red turbans’.

The emperor Shundi (r. 1333-1368) was presiding over a government that was patently corrupt and an empire that had become ungovernable. Early in his reign, he had attempted to strengthen the central government through greater implementation of Han governance, but it was already too late. He was indecisive and easily manipulated by self-serving officials, who were busy conducting poisonous court intrigues and promoting their own narrow interests, rather than working together for the common good when the empire was in grave peril. Mongol military aristocrats commanding large forces in the field defied the emperor’s authority with impunity, and often fought more against one another rather than the rebels. The Yuan dynasty had reached the terminal stage of decline. Although some of the rebel groups were destroyed, or their leaders won over to the government side, the surviving ones kept growing in strength. By the 1350s, most of southern China and parts of the north were out of Yuan control.

Toughened by years of military contests with each other, the rebel forces under a disciplined and well-organized Chinese empire-builder, Zhu Yuanzhang, who was an outstanding tactician and strategist, methodically eliminated his Chinese rivals in the south. In 1367 he sent an expeditionary force of 250,000 north ‘to recover the country for Chinese rule and to save the people’. In 1368, he established a new dynasty, the Ming (meaning ‘bright’), with himself as the emperor and Hongwu (Vast Martial) as his reign period. Meanwhile, his troops were marching towards the main Yuan capital, Yanjing, taking over provinces in northern China in accordance with his plan. In 1369, Yuan Shundi died after fleeing from his capitals, one after another. His heir, Ayushiridara (also known as Yuan Zhaozong), took refuge in Karakorum, where he was joined by the remnants of Yuan forces retreating from the onslaught of the Ming. Driven back to their homeland, the Mongols saw their domination of East Asia come to an end after ninety-eight years of ruling

the whole of China. Their rule of northern China lasted several decades longer. During most of the period under Mongol control, China was either ravaged by war on its own soil or bore the burden of the Mongol foreign military campaigns. The harsh regime of internecine wars and intolerable economic exploitation left China impoverished and many areas depopulated. These legacies of the Yuan were urgent matters for the Ming to address. The psychological impact of the harsh foreign rule might have been an important factor leading to Ming China's striking withdrawal from foreign involvement, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

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